

What are Child Abuse and Neglect?

Your most important task as a child care provider is to keep children safe. Unfortunately, that sometimes means protecting a child from maltreatment. But what is child maltreatment, and what does it look like when a child is being maltreated? Child maltreatment is a broad term that refers to child abuse and neglect. There are four main types of child maltreatment – physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional/psychological abuse, and neglect. Let's take a closer look at each one.

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse can include any act of force that causes a child bodily injury. This can mean hitting, kicking, shaking, burning, pushing, biting, binding, cutting, gagging, scalding, throwing, choking, holding under water, twisting limbs, etc. In Texas, discipline by a parent or guardian is not considered abuse as long as it does not expose the child to a substantial risk of harm.

A child who is being physically abused might have bruises that are extensive, frequent, appear to be different ages, are on the back side of the body or on soft tissue areas, or are shaped like objects such as belts. This child might have other serious injuries such as fractures, burn marks, bite marks, black eyes, internal bleeding, head trauma, or dental injuries. Children who are physically abused may be extremely passive or withdrawn, or they may act out aggressively. They may seem fearful, tired, and/or clumsy. They may wear unseasonable clothing to hide injuries, be out of care for a period of time and return with injuries, experience developmental delays, and even make comments or statements about being abused.



Sexual Abuse

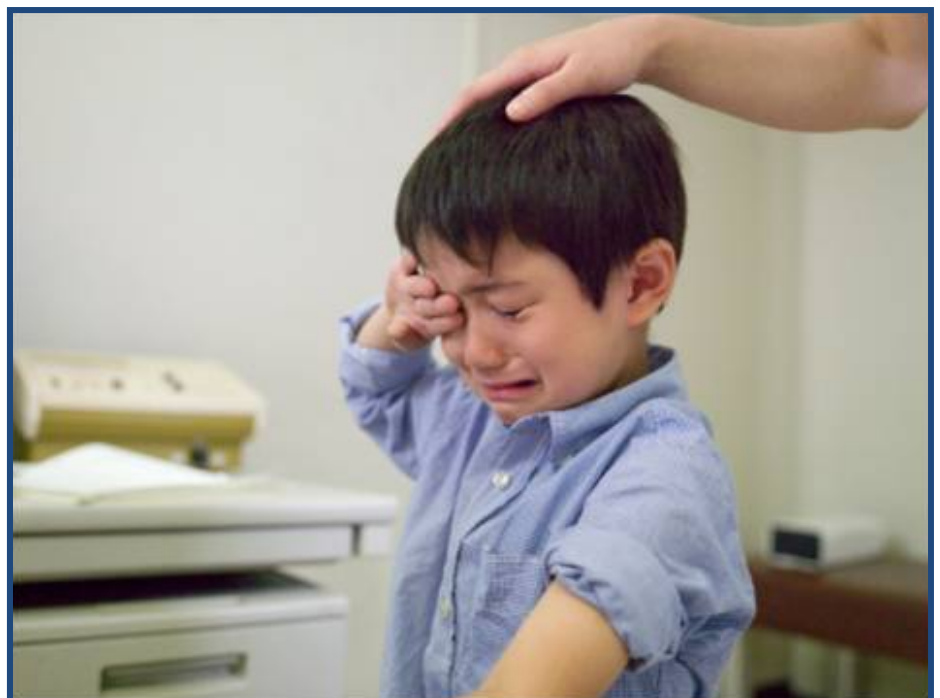
Sexual abuse is any sexual act intended to arouse the abuser, and particularly any act the child cannot understand or consent to, and may be coerced rather than forced. This includes sexual assault, indecency, failure to prevent sexual conduct harmful to a child, compelling or encouraging a child to engage in sexual conduct, and/or involvement in the creation of child pornography or a sexual performance. Sexual abuse affects both boys and girls, and can happen to a child in any age group.

A child who is being sexually abused may experience bleeding, bruising, itching, redness, or swelling of the genitals or anus, frequent yeast infections or urinary tract infections, torn, stained, or bloody underwear, unexplained gagging, or even pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections. An abused child might appear to regress in his development (e.g. a potty-trained child who starts wetting the bed). He might have changes in appetite, declining academic performance, unexplained aches and pains, extreme mood swings, and/or a preoccupation with sexual behavior. Children who are sexually abused may withdraw or act out. They may be fearful (especially of certain people, places, or situations, or of an entire gender), clingy, and cry excessively. They may self-mutilate, abuse drugs or alcohol, or become sexually promiscuous. They may even make comments about being sexually abused.

Emotional or Psychological Abuse

Emotional abuse is an emotional injury to a child that results in a measurable impairment to the child's growth, development, or psychological functioning. An emotionally abusive parent or caregiver might ignore the child, withhold love/affection, only give attention to bad behavior, engage in name-calling, screaming, sarcasm, disrespect, blaming, belittling, criticizing, or terrorizing, refer to the child as "it", "stupid", "bad", "worthless", or "evil", or have unpredictable expectations and reactions that leave the child guessing how to behave. Emotional abuse often occurs in conjunction with other forms of abuse and neglect.

A child who is being emotionally abused might show behavioral signs, such as eating disorders, ulcers, trouble making friends, withdrawing or acting out, avoiding affection, fearfulness, clinginess, being overly compliant or overly oppositional, being "parental" toward other children, have dramatic mood swings, academic or developmental issues, sleep problems, low self-esteem and motivation, depression or self-mutilation, display stress response behaviors (e.g. facial tics, rocking back and forth, or age-inappropriate thumb sucking), wet the bed, even if the child is potty trained, try to run away from home, or even abuse drugs or alcohol.



Neglect



Neglect is when an adult who is supposed to be responsible for a child's wellbeing (e.g. a parent, child care provider, guardian, conservator, etc.) fails to ensure that the child has the food, medical treatment, or supervision required for the child's basic survival. It includes behaviors like withholding food, leaving a child unsupervised for an unreasonable period of time, leaving a child under five in a vehicle without appropriate supervision, refusing relief services that are needed in order to meet the child's basic needs, failing to address an infestation in the home that could harm the child, and refusing to take the child to the doctor despite a serious medical need. Neglect is probably the most common form of child maltreatment.

A child who is neglected may appear malnourished and even experience failure-to-thrive. Her clothes might be dirty, stained, or torn, and may be inappropriate for the weather. She may have scaly skin or dark circles under her eyes, and may appear to have poor hygiene. She might have medical needs, such as a need for glasses, dental work, or medication, that go untreated for extended periods of time. This child might steal, hoard, or beg for food, or constantly complain of being hungry. She might appear fatigued or listless, or express feelings of embarrassment. She might show withdrawal or act-out. She might talk about being left alone, taking care of siblings, or being allowed to do dangerous things. She might be late or absent often.

Sources:

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